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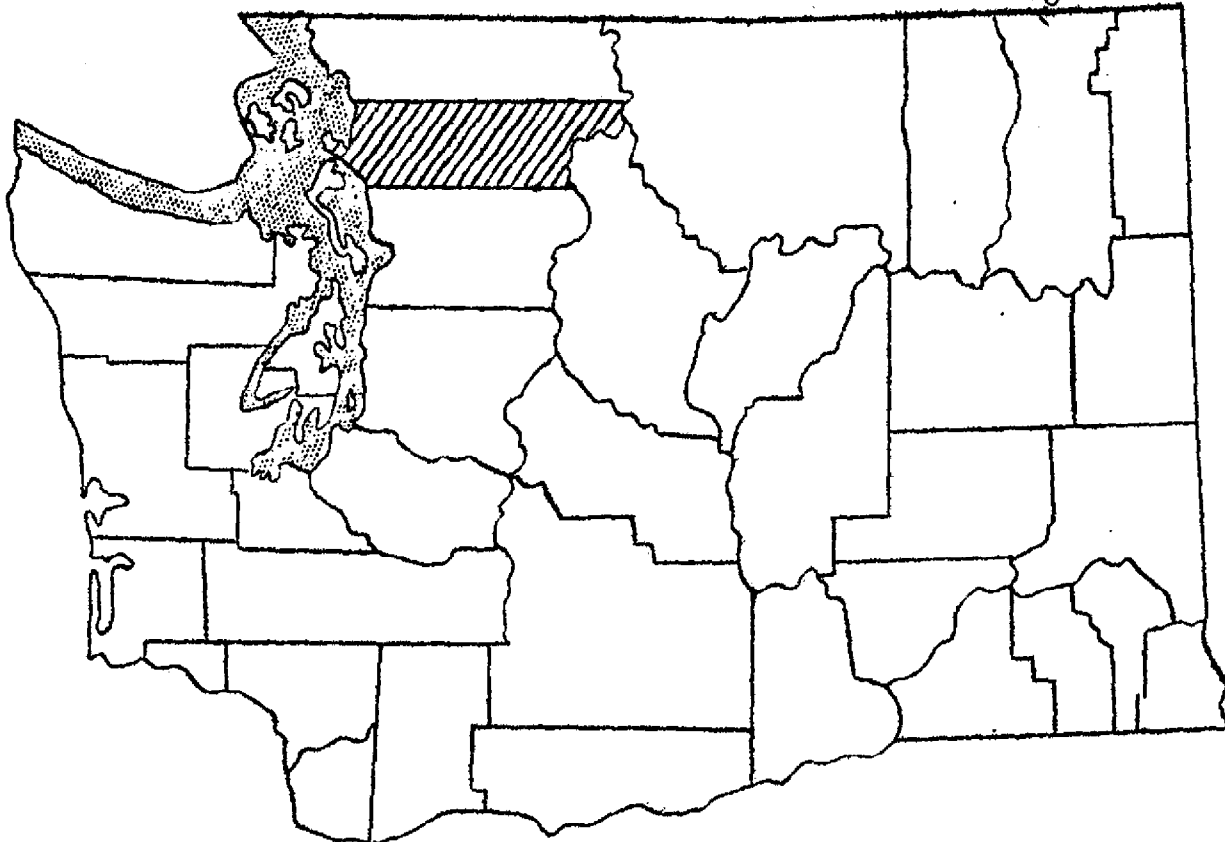
SKAGIT COUNTY AGRICULTURE

WASHINGTON

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COUNTY AGRICULTURAL DATA SERIES
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FOREWORD

This bulletin on Skagit County is one of a second edition series devoted to presenting the history and present nature of agriculture in each of the thirty-nine counties of the State of Washington. The original series was initiated in 1956 by the Washington State Department of Agriculture. State funds were matched by moneys from the United States Department of Agriculture under the Research and Marketing Act of 1946.

County agricultural data books are intended to serve a variety of needs. Continually changing conditions in a dynamic state such as Washington require constant planning by groups and individuals, especially in the field of marketing agricultural products. Knowledge of land resources, population and agricultural-economic trends in a local area such as Skagit County is of great value. This book will be useful for reference in public and private instruction by social studies teachers. It has been devised also to inform adults interested in knowing more about their immediate area.

Selected geographic facts, agricultural history, population trends and statistical data are included to give an over-all appreciation of Skagit County. Enumerations of the United States Censuses of Population and Agriculture since 1890 are summarized to give a perspective of development since the establishment of Skagit County in 1883. Facts on topography, soil, climate and forest which influence farming are integrated from surveys and reports of government agencies. Estimates of leading crops by years since 1939 by the Washington Crop and Livestock Reporting Service provide a measure of the trend in the agriculture of the county farm industry.

Acknowledgment is accorded the professional work of several persons. Immediate direction was under Emery C. Wilcox, Agricultural Statistician in Charge, Field Operations Division, Statistical Reporting Service, United States Department of Agriculture. Research involved in up-dating and revising the original information and the preparation of the manuscript of the second edition of the Skagit County bulletin was performed by George K. Saito, Research Analyst, Washington State Department of Agriculture. Review and editing of the first draft of the present bulletin was done by Emery C. Wilcox. Statisticians of the Washington Crop and Livestock Reporting Service gave valuable assistance. Margaret B. Quiroga, Washington State Department of Agriculture, typed all of the textual and tabular material and prepared the graphs. The bulletins were reproduced and assembled by members of the clerical staff of the Washington Crop and Livestock Reporting Service.

Olympia, Washington
June 1, 1964

J. D. Dwyer, Director
Washington State Department of Agriculture

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PART I

HISTORY OF SKAGIT COUNTY AGRICULTURE

Introduction

Skagit County, which ranks high nationally as well as in the state in several farm products, is situated in northwestern Washington. It is a land of Puget Sound islands, reclaimed tidal lands, wide valleys and forested Cascade Mountains. Most of Skagit's agricultural activity is found in the western part of the county known as the Skagit-Samish Lowland. This lowland region encompasses the tideflats, delta plains and valley bottomlands of the Skagit and Samish Rivers. The area supports an expanding agricultural economy based largely on livestock, vegetables, feed crops and berries.

Skagit County's area of 1,775 square miles (approximately 1,110,440 acres) makes it twenty-first in areal size among the 39 Washington counties. According to the 1959 Census of Agriculture, nearly 13 percent of the county land area was in farms and about 5.2 percent, or 58,396 acres, was in harvested cropland. Some areas unsuited for crops because of existing forests and rugged topography are still important as woodland pastures. Since its creation, Skagit County has been settled by immigrants from eastern United States and Europe who were attracted by its climate and its rich resources of soils, minerals and timber. Typical of most counties on the Pacific Coast, Skagit has grown steadily in population and in agricultural production along with the other economic activities.

History 1/

Prior to the coming of the white man, several groups of Indians occupied what is now Skagit County. The Skagit group inhabited the central portion of the Skagit River delta and part of Whidbey Island (Island County). The upper Skagits controlled the up-river section from Sedro Woolley eastward to the Cascade divide. The Swinomish lived in a village on Swinomish Slough at the present site of La Conner and held part of Whidbey Island, eastern Fidalgo Island and part of the Skagit delta. The Samish lived on Samish, Cypress and Guemes Islands and in the lower part of the Samish Valley. The upper Samish Indians ranged inland in the upper Samish Valley and the plains around Mount Vernon. Smaller bands with sedentary villages on the Skagit delta included the Stkitabish, Squinomish and Kikdalis. These groups lived by berry, root and herb gathering, salmon fishing,

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clam digging and upland hunting. All the Indians of the Skagit and Samish River Valleys were friendly, interrelated and allied in a defensive confederacy against the raids of warlike northern tribes. During the critical Indian War of 1855-56 against white settlers in eastern Washington Territory, these Indians remained friendly. In 1855, when Governor Isaac Stevens negotiated the Treaty of Point Elliott with various Puget Sound tribes, the land, fishing and hunting rights of Skagit area Indians were recognized and the Swinomish Indian Reservation was established on southern Fidalgo Island.

The history of western civilization in Skagit County begins with the explorations of the Spanish in 1790. Spaniards gave names to Fidalgo Island, Rosario Strait, Padillah Bay, Fidalgo Bay and Guemes Island. With the exception of some fur trading on the Skagit delta by the Hudson's Bay Fur Company and early missionary work by Francois Blanchet, activities of white men in the area were very limited until the 1850's.

The first agricultural white settlement was located on Fidalgo Island in 1859 by William Munks, Enoch Compton and Joseah Larry and on Guemes Island by P. O'Bryant. These pioneers brought cattle and seed from the Bellingham area of Whatcom County and practiced livestock and potato farming. In 1863, settlement was started on the delta plains and tidal flats (the La Conner Flats) by Michael Sullivan and Samuel Calhoun. The first farms at the mouth of the Samish River were established by Ben Samson and Edward McTaggart.

Land clearing in heavily timbered terrain was a major handicap and most farm development followed in the wake of logging as the settlers pushed eastward from the Puget Sound sector into the delta and upper valley bottomlands. During the 1860's and 1870's the Skagit and Samish delta lands were occupied rapidly when the immense fertility of the soils became known. La Conner became a port for Puget Sound side-wheeler steamers and was the first post office and trading center of the lower Skagit Valley. In accessible locations on the flatland

1/ This historical summary has been derived from seven sources:

- (1) The History of Skagit and Snohomish Counties, Washington, Chicago: Interstate Publishing Company, 1906. 1117 pages.
- (2) Otto Klement, "The Story of Skagit County", The Concrete Enterprise, Concrete, Washington, Fourth Annual Number, 1913.
- (3) The Mount Vernon Argus, Mount Vernon, Washington, 50th Anniversary Edition, February 20, 1941.
- (4) Richard M. Perry, The Counties of Washington, Olympia: Secretary of State, State of Washington, 1943. (Mimeographed).
- (5) Hazel L. Laughlin, The La Conner Flats of Western Washington, Seattle: University of Washington, 1952. Master of Arts Thesis, 123 pages.
- (6) Washington State Associations of County Commissioners and County Engineers in cooperation with the State College of Washington, The Book of the Counties, 1953, Skagit County, by Charles M. Dwelley, pages 63-66.
- (7) O. C. Upchurch, "The Swinomish People and Their State", The Pacific Northwest Quarterly, 27:283-310, July 1938. This is a detailed study of the Swinomish Indian Reservation constitution with notes on other Indians of Skagit County.

settlers produced commercial grain (oats and barley) and hay and also exported surplus beef, pork, bacon and butter. Tidewater sawmill and fishing towns from Seattle northward provided a good market for Skagit farm products. The "Flats" also enjoyed a good local trade with miners and loggers who debarked from steamers at La Conner and purchased "grubstakes" before taking the trail eastward. Favored by soil, climate and location, the delta settlers developed one of the early commercial agricultural sections of western Washington.

An important agricultural development began in the Skagit delta lowlands in 1872 when A. G. Tillinghast planted a small trial cabbage seed crop. By 1875 the district was shipping seed of superior quality to the East. By 1903 it became a recognized cabbage seed growing area and the D. M. Ferry Seed Company and the Charles Lilly Company were contracting for increasing amounts. Acreages of cabbage, turnip, beets and spinach grown for seed have continued to be important up to the present time.

The agricultural history of the middle and upper Skagit Valley and the upper Samish started about 1870. Pioneers, attracted by rich bottomlands which could be settled in 160-acre units under the Homestead Act of 1862, moved into interior valleys in advance of the cedar bolt and Douglas fir loggers and devoted years of hard labor to slashing, burning and clearing the virgin forest. A large log jam blocked the navigation of the Skagit River above Mount Vernon and this hindered the movement of settlers as well as goods. When the Federal and Territorial governments failed to appropriate funds for the removal of the log jam, a group of local loggers, helped by public subscription, cleared the obstruction. The river was opened for flat boats and log rafting and an influx of homesteaders moved up the valley to Mount Vernon, Burlington, Sedro Woolley and beyond. A gold rush to Ruby Creek and eastern Skagit County beginning in 1877 brought boat travel up the river. In the 1880's and 1890's logging, shingle bolt cutting and rafting advanced along the river.

Logging and timber companies originally owned much of the western Skagit County lowlands through purchases of proved-up homesteads and timber claims made under the Timber and Stone Act of 1878. Such timber companies as Pope and Talbot, Lyman Timber Company and Bradberry Logging Company played an important role at attracting settlers and European immigrants from 1880 to 1920. Logged-over land was sold on credit terms at prices ranging from five to twenty dollars per acre. Most of this land, particularly in the middle and upper Skagit Valley, was sold in 20, 40 and 80 acre units. As a result of small land sales by the timber companies and general practice of part-time or intensive farming, many farms of Skagit County today are under 50 acres in size.

Most early agricultural settlement in the upper Skagit and Samish Valleys and all higher lands in the interior was made by part-time homesteaders and farmers who worked seasonally or sporadically at logging and mining. These pioneers practiced subsistence farming based on garden crops for home use and hay and grain for the support of cattle and horses. A large labor force employed in logging and lumbering in Skagit River cities later provided a cash market for beef, pork, eggs and dairy products. Settlers who were prominent in the beginning of farming in the middle and upper portions of the county were Jasper Gates and Joseph F. Dwelley at Mount Vernon, Charles von Pressentin at Birdview and Joseph Hart and David Batey at Sedro Woolley.

By 1880 there was enough interest among settlers for local county government. The Washington Territorial Legislature created Skagit County on November 28, 1883, from the southern portion of Whatcom County. It was named after one of the more salient geographic features of the area--the waterway and the wide, fertile valley of the Skagit River. On early maps the delta and lower valley of the river were called "Skadgett Indian Country". Because the active movement for countyhood was led by the original settlers along the Skagit River, the boundaries were established to include most of the stream's drainage which extends far eastward into the Cascades. As a result, the county is approximately 93 miles long and about 24 miles wide from north to south. It has a shape which reflects the early unity of agricultural trade and timber rafting along the waterways of a major navigable river in the Puget Sound Basin. La Conner, on the delta flatlands, was the original center of government. Later, through popular election, a permanent county seat was established at Mount Vernon.

In November 1891, the Great Northern Railway was completed between Seattle and New Westminster, British Columbia, connecting the middle Skagit Valley and the Samish Valley with the Puget Sound cities to the south. Mount Vernon and Burlington and surrounding farm lands enjoyed a greatly improved marketing position for farm products. As a highway network grew in western Skagit County, these cities became centrally located for the buying, processing and shipping of dairy and poultry products and seeds, vegetables and berries.

Establishment of railroads not only encouraged the growth of agriculture but also brought new forest, mineral and construction industries with large payrolls. Improved transportation and jobs in nonfarm industry brought about changes and new trends in farming. Subsistence and general farming changed to specialized farming in dairying, poultry raising and vegetable growing. Logging camps, lumber mills, logging equipment manufacturers, the cement industry at Concrete and hydroelectric dam construction attracted new families to all sections of the county. New industries in towns and cities as well as in the mountains encouraged part-time farming--a system in which a wage earner supplemented his income by living on and operating a small farm. Part-time farming combined with logging, sawmilling and construction work became an important activity in the mountainous upper Skagit Valley and the foothills of the upper Samish basin.

The plentiful supply of fertile cut-over land and the opportunities for work attracted many new immigrants to the interior lands of Skagit County. Sedro Woolley and the upper Skagit Valley received timber workers and part-time farmers from western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee. Many of these folk today operate numerous farms in the upper Skagit bottom lands.

An immigration of marked influence on agricultural development included the Scandinavians and Germans. Industrious, and skilled in various types of farming, these European immigrants started out in Skagit County as loggers, lumberjacks and fishermen and part-time farmers. As forest work declined they purchased land and began full-time operation of dairy, poultry, vegetable and other specialty farms. They made important contributions to Skagit County agriculture in the improvement of yields, dairy stock and farming methods and in the organization of marketing cooperatives.

The agriculture of Skagit County has been promoted and encouraged by a number of organizations. Since the beginning with the reclamation of the marshy lowlands in the west during the 1870's, the county has benefited from a large investment in land improvements and in processing and marketing facilities. The Whitney, Sisson and Company, formed by R. E. Whitney, E. A. Sisson and A. G. Tillinghast, made an important contribution by devising methods of diking and ditching and contracting for such work in the Skagit, La Conner and Samish Flats. Their work was important in the 1870's, bringing much of tidewater Skagit County under cultivation as well as proving the feasibility of farming in the marshy lowlands of the Skagit and Samish Valleys.

Several concerns are responsible for promoting vegetable and seed farming. Experimentation with growing, grading and marketing contributed greatly to establishing Skagit County as a national leader in the vegetable seed industry. The Tillinghast Seed Company of La Conner and the Charles H. Lilly Company and the Associated Seed Growers Incorporated of Mount Vernon did important pioneer work. The Northwestern-Washington Experiment Station in Mount Vernon has advanced agriculture through its scientific research.

The county's development as a major dairying and poultry area was encouraged and guided by several organizations. Prominent in this respect have been the Skagit County Dairymen's Association at Burlington, the Northwest Dairigold Company at Mount Vernon and the Dairy Herd Improvement Association of Burlington. Poultry farming has been influenced largely by the Western Farmer's Association branch at Mount Vernon.

A change in land use on many farms to more intensive vegetables and berry farming was stimulated by new food processing investments during the 1925-1945 period. When the Broder Canning Company came to Mount Vernon in 1926, a trend was started toward green peas, sweet corn and other vegetable crops with ensilage for dairy stock being an important by-product of these crops. Later, the San Juan Islands Company and Pictsweet Foods Incorporated established canneries and freezing plants at Mount Vernon.

In 1936, S. A. Moffat of Mount Vernon pioneered the important frozen foods industry in Skagit County. Fifty tons of green peas were pre-cooled in a barn at La Conner and then shipped to the Diamond Ice Company freezing plant in Seattle. Attracted by the Skagit area's suitability for growing processing peas, Diamond Ice Company build a freezing plant at Mount Vernon in 1940. This plant was subsequently purchased and expanded by Cedargreen Company and leased later by the Libby, McNeill and Libby Company. In 1938, Cascade Frozen Foods Incorporated was established at Burlington. By 1950, the greatest percentage of Skagit County processing vegetables and berries were frozen. The Skagit County Pea Growers Association has contributed much for the development of pea production.

During the nearly 100 years of its agricultural history, Skagit County has grown from a few pioneer clearings on the islands and the Skagit and Samish delta plains to over 1,700 farms, distributed from the sea to far back in the Cascade Mountains. The value of all farm products sold from Skagit County farms has increased greatly since 1940 when it was worth \$3,632,262 to \$10,566,287 in 1949 and \$15,890,942 in 1959. Farming has progressed from subsistence and general hay, grain and livestock farming to intensive dairy, poultry, vegetable and berry farming in the western lowland plains. Part-time farming of the hay, dairy and poultry type still exists in the interior valleys and benchlands where forest, mining and construction industry are active.

Table 1. Skagit County's Rank Compared With
Other Washington Counties

| Item Compared | Rank | Quantity |
|---|------|--------------------------|
| <u>General</u> | | |
| Land area | 21 | 1,110,400 acres |
| Number of farms | 11 | 1,740 farms |
| Land in farms-percent | 28 | 12.8 percent |
| Average size of farms | 31 | 81.5 acres |
| Cropland harvested | 18 | 58,396 acres |
| Irrigated land in farms | 21 | 5,577 acres |
| Rural farm population | 12 | 5,516 persons <u>1/</u> |
| Total county population | 13 | 51,350 persons <u>1/</u> |
| <u>Cash farm income</u> | | |
| Value of all farm products sold | 13 | 15,890,942 dollars |
| Value of livestock and live- stock products sold | 9 | 9,167,984 dollars |
| Value of crops sold | 15 | 6,722,958 dollars |
| <u>Livestock on farms</u> | | |
| All cattle and calves | 11 | 44,160 head |
| Milk cows | 4 | 16,367 head |
| Hogs | 29 | 1,063 head |
| Chickens | 7 | 269,471 birds |
| Horses and mules | 22 | 736 head |
| Sheep and lambs | 18 | 2,883 head |
| <u>Dairy and poultry products sold</u> | | |
| Value of dairy products sold .. | 4 | 5,550,915 dollars |
| Whole milk sold | 4 | 126,125,771 pounds |
| Value of poultry products sold | 8 | 1,575,773 dollars |
| Chickens sold | 8 | 571,349 birds |
| Eggs sold | 7 | 3,623,908 dozen |
| <u>Important crops harvested</u> | | |
| Sweet corn | 2 | 2,497 acres |
| Strawberries | 2 | 1,108 acres |
| Cucumbers | 2 | 148 acres |
| Green peas | 3 | 13,066 acres |
| Clover-Timothy hay | 4 | 15,812 acres |

1/ U. S. Census of Population, 1960.

Source: U. S. Census of Agriculture, 1959.